

# **Learning To Be an Education Leader: How a Web-Based Course Meets Some of the Challenges of Leadership Training and Development**

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## **Abstract**

This article captures how a web-based course, designed as a part of the School Leadership Grant Program, meets some challenges of leadership training and development. The content, structure and discussion board exercises of the sample course are designed to provide more reflective and practical opportunities for leader-learners to develop expertise. In addition, the article discusses the opportunities and problems that lie in the written form, including the rich information sources and e-mail communications that are unique to web classes.

## **Introduction**

According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2001), more than 40% of public school principals will retire over the next ten years. Increasing job stress, inadequate school funding, and increased responsibility without adequate incentives have exacerbated this shortage. As current incumbents retire, the concern is that no systematic method is in place to ensure that there will be well-qualified prospects waiting in the wings to replace them. These conditions place pressure on school districts trying to fill vacant administrative positions and on universities' efforts to provide a pool of qualified people.

Considerable attention has been given to the development of guiding principles for school leadership such as those proposed by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). Recognizing the gaps and inefficiencies in the current system of preparation and professional development, this paper explains the new approaches to educational leadership and explores the opportunities presented by web-based courses to help prepare future educational leaders.

In October, 2002, the College of Education at Arizona State University, in collaboration with the Southwest Center for Educational Equity and Language Diversity and four diverse, urban school districts in the Phoenix area, was awarded a federal grant under the U.S. Department of Education sponsored School Leadership Program. The intention of the School Leadership Grant Program is to assist high need local educational agencies in developing, enhancing, or expanding programs to recruit, train, and mentor principals including assistant principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Program participants are now in the beginning of year three of a training and mentoring program titled "Learner Centered Leadership for Language Diverse Schools in High Needs Urban Settings." The Grant draws from both University knowledge and theory and the applied expertise of the four participating school districts by (1) recruiting and training new candidates for school leadership positions, (2) enhancing expertise of beginning principals and assistant principals based on new knowledge and new understandings of the commitments required of educational leaders, and (3) encouraging the retention of expert school principals through participation in mentoring and coaching activities.

## **What is Learner Centered Leadership?**

Learner centered leadership gives attention to the primary role of teaching and learning in the development of school leadership. This view, by definition, involves changing the major source of inspiration for educational leadership away from management and towards education and learning. Murphy (2002) proposes a role for leadership which entails developing a learning community, one in which greater attention is needed to promote an atmosphere of inquiry with greater focus on collaboration and shared decision making. In this new role, leaders will need to develop the capacity for reflection and promote self-inquiry among the entire school community. The American Association of School Administrators is also developing a masters program with the central focus on "learning for leadership" (Murphy & Hawley, 2003, p. 3). A concern with learning raises questions such as why this new focus is appropriate and how it helps practicing school administrators.

### **Focus on Learning**

Learner centered leadership involves a balance between the professional norms and personal dispositions of educators, with the larger good as defined by a learning

community. Understanding and valuing learning involves a repositioning of leadership away from a management focus to a learning focus. Rowan (as cited in Murphy, 2002) points out that leaders must be “pioneers in the development and management of new forms of instructional practice in schools, and [that] they . . . [develop] a thorough understanding of the rapidly evolving body of research on learning and teaching that motivates these new practices” (p. 187). If learning is to be a core focus of a new generation of education leaders, then these leaders will need a deeper and richer understandings about learning, instructional practice, curriculum development, and the multiple contexts in which these occur.

This alternative framing, one in which leaders are learners, is central to this grant and to the experiences that we are developing as part of this program. Many leadership actions are implicit in a learner-centered approach:

- ◆ The leader translates guiding ideas into educational practices that engage all members of the community.
- ◆ The leader designs effective learning processes so that individuals and organizations learn.
- ◆ The leader provides relevant school data that can be used as a tool for developing a learning community that strives to improve.
- ◆ The leader surfaces mental models that people bring to the world and helps faculty and staff identify strengths and weaknesses of these models.
- ◆ Leadership embraces a deeper understanding and learning about one’s own work and practice.

This view of learner centered leadership implies that leaders individually commit to their own learning. Learner centered leaders ask questions such as: *What do I need and want to learn? Why is it important to learn? What motivates me to learn? How am I similar and different to others? How do I know I’ve learned the right thing? How do I use what I’ve learned?* Leaders committed to their own learning need the necessary time to reflect and answer these questions and the additional opportunities to apply what they have learned to their performances as school leaders. This application of a learner centered approach to educational leadership is complicated given the current political demands on leadership, with demands for greater accountability and pressure for increased individual and school academic performance. These demands must be balanced by recognitions that learning cannot always be reduced to a product and that learners have multiple reasons for engaging in learning. Therefore, the learning embedded in learner centered leadership must also take into account practical dilemmas and educational contexts for practicing school leaders.

According to Lieberman, Falk and Alexander (1995), learner centered leadership:

... requires school leaders to simultaneously be educators, problems solvers, crisis managers, change agents, enablers, consensus builders and networkers, as well as limit setters and authority figures. Enacting these sometimes contradictory roles and achieving a balanced performance tests even those with the strongest mettle: when to assert and when to hold back; when to intervene and how to do it right; when to deliberately lead and take a position and when to facilitate group struggle; how to handle conflict and how to make it productive; how to be accepting and respectful of differences while seeking to achieve overall agreements; how to be patient and supportive of strengths, even in the face of difficult problems; how to advocate for teachers, children and their families while simultaneously maintaining a smoothly running school. (p. 120)

Using the principles of learner centered leadership, the metaphor of principal as “captain of the ship” or as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) no longer sustains critical scrutiny in the 21st century. The role of school leaders is more related to that of teacher and educator.

Leading a school is not the same as applying universally generalizable principles. Reading and discussing abstract theories of leadership need to be combined with opportunities to experience what leaders do and how it feels to be a leader (Bridges & Hallinger, 1997). Practice and experience are fundamental to the development of expertise in the area of complex problem solving. Situating learning in a real world context makes the new knowledge more meaningful and usable (Hallinger, Leithwood, & Murphy, 1993; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). This understanding points to the importance of blending theory with careful consideration of its meaning in practice. Administrative certification programs and courses must not only prepare novices to enter a school, but must insure that beginners will learn from their experiences (and mistakes) on the way to achieving expert status. To better prepare people to be school administrators, formal education will have to include experiences that have traditionally been available on the job.

Recent literature on cognitive psychology has contributed to explore how reflection functions in the learners’ route towards expertise. Expertise develops as the result of “reflective skills,” the ability to think more deeply about a problem, and to take action or make adjustments accordingly (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Short and Rinehart’s (1993) research on the reflective activities in a leadership training program concludes that students are able to move from a lower level of expertise, always describing the surface features of a situation or problem, to a higher level of expertise. They are more likely to see the underlining patterns and deep structure of problems, resort to more extensive knowledge base, react more quickly and offer more alternatives.

However, it is more important to situate reflection and knowledge acquisition in practical contexts so that students recognize when and how to use knowledge properly (Bridges & Hallinger, 1997). Expert practice includes not only a knowledge base but also understanding of the circumstances in which it is applied. Experts

are people with content-specific knowledge. This expertise cannot be mastered by being told what to do. It is more part of a performance arena, part of a complex performance rather than a discrete piece of information. Experts take action and make adjustments during the act. They also reconsider these actions after-the-fact. Administrative practice is a complex art, which combines thinking abstractly, weighing of prior experience, and taking action. To use a metaphor suggested by Gladwin (1970), it is more like driving a taxi cab in New York city, in which the performance involves keeping the final destination in mind, while making multiple adjustments based on weather, time of day, traffic, accidents, advice of passengers, etc. No two performances are ever exactly the same because no two sets of conditions are ever exactly alike. Expertise comes from the combination of action and reflection. Expertise is enhanced as one learns to adjust one's performance based on these key factors and one's experiences with them. Learning from one's prior actions is basic to the development of expertise. The emphasis on leadership practice (in training and development programs) also requires a practitioner to develop a more accurate understanding of context (Glasman & Glasman, 1997). Therefore, students must have explicit opportunities to reflect in- and on-action (Bennis, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Schön, 1991). Reflection is the very process of learning and practitioners engage in a dialogue of thinking and doing both during an event and afterwards. Tacit knowledge becomes manifest; the internal, implicit route towards expertise is externalized and the foundation of new knowledge acquisition is set in place.

## **Issues and Challenges in Web-Based Instruction for Leadership Development**

Based on these overarching considerations about leadership preparation and development, this article further explores the following questions,

1. What are the examples of web-based course on leadership training and development that situates in some place of the preparation and experience continuum?
2. What unique opportunities do the web-based teaching environment offer specific to the education of educational leaders?
3. What unique problems do the web-based teaching environment present specific to the preparation of educational leaders?

## **Content and Structure of the Educational Leadership Web Classes**

This sample course uses Blackboard as the course management system. Other courses developed by the authors to date might use a different course management

system, such as WebCT, or more customized approaches to the development of course materials and experiences.

*Course description—learner centered leadership.* The course syllabus for the course Learner Centered Leadership explains:

*This course is designed to introduce you principles, theories, attributes related to learner centered leadership. It will include concepts related to systems thinking that are critical to the long-term sustainability of your school, agency, or organization. You will have the opportunity to create language for your organization that will encompass the concepts embedded in global thinking, the ability to conceptualize globally and act locally. You will also gain expertise in managing the critical interaction of assets (fiscal, human, and ecological), complexity, and readiness.*

*What knowledge is required of a learner-centered leader? How do you get this knowledge? What do leaders do to be seen as leaders? How are individuals selected for leadership positions? These are a few of the questions that will be addressed in this course and in modules presented. Leadership involves both a knowledge base and an action component. Leaders are people that are out in the world, involved in some action, with other people. Therefore the study of leadership will involve both understanding of this knowledge base and demonstrating actions/involvement in the real world.*

The course is divided into six course modules:

1. Leadership and Learning
2. Leadership and Motivation
3. Leadership and Management Processes
4. Cognitive Approaches to Leadership Development
5. Leadership Case Studies
6. Leadership and Personal Knowledge

Novice and experienced administrators begin with a broad overview of objectives and then move more deeply into specific readings, exercises, and assessments.

*Content themes.* The first question proposed by this article asks about the content of the educational leadership courses. Looking at the content allows one to question the extent to which the content of the course draws from a knowledge base in educational administration as developed in the most recent *Handbook on Educational Administration* (Murphy & Louis, 1999).

There are some traditional content areas and course topics, which emphasize managerial, organizational, and environmental issues in educational leadership:

- ◆ Professional standards in educational administration
- ◆ Leadership skills and self-assessments
- ◆ Schools as organizations and institutions
- ◆ Leadership and management processes
- ◆ School politics and the uses of power

There are also a few newer leadership areas and perspectives covered in the courses.

- ◆ Learner centered leadership
- ◆ Value themes and ethical dimensions of school leadership
- ◆ Leadership and creativity
- ◆ Cognitive perspectives on leadership
- ◆ Narrative approaches to leadership development

This balance of old and new represents a field which has undergone much change over the past 15 to 20 years, with new insights from well established disciplines and new perspectives raising new problems, questions, and opportunities for educational administration.

An example of updating a traditional theme with a newer content theme is the view that leadership involves self-knowledge. To build understanding and awareness, there are multiple self-assessments available to students on-line in the course and students have an opportunity to assess their own skills, strengths, weaknesses, and inclinations. One particular assignment uses a 360-degree evaluation tool in which students provide email addresses of subordinates, peers, and supervisors who rate participants on the Leadership Development Needs Assessment (LEADNA). Results for one of the groups is presented in Table 1.

Each participant is given an individual identifier and asked to identify the names and email addresses of five respondents to include (supervisors, peers, and subordinates). Evaluators are then sent an email notifying them that they have been selected by a participant to complete the LEADNA and directed to a website which allows them to complete the actual 360 degree evaluation. Individual and group norms are calculated using Microsoft's Structured Query Language and Macromedia ColdFusion. Scores are compiled and returned to the students with individual and

Table 1: Sample LEADNA Results for Individual Participant with Class Average (April 2003)

Leadership Area	Individual Score	Class Average	Norm Group
Strategy	3.75	3.82	3.33
Communication	4.00	4.29	3.50
Knowledge	4.00	4.20	4.50
Learning	4.25	4.35	4.00
Influence	4.00	4.12	4.00
Relationships	4.75	4.49	4.00
Delegation	3.50	3.33	3.70
Priorities	4.00	4.42	4.00
Integrity	4.00	4.59	3.11
Confidence	3.50	4.11	3.78

Scale = 1 (lowest), 5 (highest). ©1997. All intellectual property rights have been transferred to DOE/CAO at no cost. DOE/CAO and WEC transfer this assessment tool to US organizations, and non-exclusive rights to use it, at no cost the joint DOE/CAO and WEC technology transfer program.

class norms in the ten leadership skills areas: (1) strategy, (2) communication, (3) knowledge, (4) learning, (5) influence, (6) relationships, (7) delegation, (8) priorities, (9) integrity, and (10) confidence. There is a follow-up, which encourages learners to reflect on their own perceptions of strengths and weaknesses and how these ratings from others match their own self-perceptions. Instruments such as the LEADNA are available online, and free of charge from the US Department of Energy as are instruments related to instructional capabilities and leadership training.

*Module structure.* Each web based module is built around the same organizational structure and includes:

- ◆ Introduction and overview
- ◆ Objectives
- ◆ Pathway and reading assignments
- ◆ Readings and articles (textbook assignments and on-line reading)
- ◆ Discussion board assignments
- ◆ Mastery exercise

Each module begins with an overview of the topic. For example, the module on Cognitive Perspectives begins with an introduction that sets the stage for reading and discussion. The module explains research and cases studies on leadership and learning and considers how leaders resolve important life issues, in their minds and in the minds of the various audiences to which they hope to effect desired changes. The focus on cognitive perspectives connects to scholarly work, which examines how ideas and thoughts, images and mental representations develop, and how they are stored, accessed, combined, remembered, rearranged, and distorted (Bransford et al., 2000; Gardner, 1995).

While many teachers in educational leadership programs have taken an educational psychology course at one time or another, this provides an opportunity to look more carefully at the dilemmas of leadership, and the expertise required for what Shulman (1986) calls “subject specific pedagogy.” One goal of this learning is for students to begin to see themselves as learners again, and what it means for them to model learning as the leader of a team, unit, or organization. These conversations also present the view that there is a parallel to “subject specific pedagogy” that we term “leadership specific administration” which allows learners to begin to apply the theoretical understandings of leadership to the practical situations that they face on a daily basis.

*Discussion board assignments.* Another central idea in the curriculum has to do with understanding how leaders learn from experience. The web-based class asks leaders to describe and share their responses to specific questions or situations. Respondents reflect on their actions and read the comments of others. This provides a review of, or reality check on one’s thinking. As leaders become more experienced, they are able to manage mental resources more efficiently and utilize the *extra* time

to think more deeply about the problem to reach better answers or provide better options for consideration. For example, the first time a school principal faces an angry parent, she may react to the anger instead of the condition that precipitated the angry parent. On reflection, the principal may realize this tendency, and adopt another strategy, which leads to a different outcome, more in line with the more deeply held conviction of how to help others. As stated earlier, leadership requires action in the face of dynamic situations involving complex, and interwoven themes (Gardner, 1995; Hallinger et al., 1993; Heifitz & Linsky, 2002). If leaders are to learn from experience, and not make the same mistakes over and over again, there must be opportunities to reflect on these actions.

Theory, reflection, and practice are designed first to externalize the otherwise internal and autonomous expertise process. The emphasis on self-knowledge and learning from experience requires the learner to examine closely how one moves from novice to expert (Bennis, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hallinger et al., 1993). That is, what prior knowledge do experts need, and how do they adjust themselves to different practical situations and learn from experience? The process towards expertise is not linear with clear-cut starting and ending points, but an ongoing circle where reflection, application and growth occur again and again. School life is increasingly complex and school leaders are facing ambiguous and ill-defined situations. School leaders need to examine their own beliefs about the complexity of teaching and effective school leadership, which combines abstract human thought processes, concentrated study, and practice. The learners take from the web-based course not a few generalizable rules, but cognitive skills that are applicable to real-world situations.

For example, one discussion board assignment included the following scenario:

*You are the team leader in a department with a teacher who doesn't seem to follow the school rules concerning dress, for himself and for his students. The teacher has been teaching in your school for four years and teaches the 8th grade. His students do well on the AIMS test and he is popular with students and parents. The source of complaints comes from other teachers. They complain it is unfair that, Mr. Y and his students do not follow school rules, which they enforce in their classes (as well as following the dress code).*

- ◆ What, if anything, would you tell the teacher, concerning his decision to wear ripped jeans to school, and to allow his students to chew gum in class, listen to Sony Walkman tapes, and generally, does his "own thing?"
- ◆ What might you tell other teachers who complained about the dress and attitude of this teacher?
- ◆ What does this case have to do with Model I and Model II theories of Human Behavior? (Douglas McGregor [1960] referred to these theories as Theory X and Theory Y.)

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- ◆ Are there other instances where the formal school rules are not enforced?
  - ◆ Explain how you, as a leader, decide when to enforce the rules and when to ignore them?

In response, the student would be expected to apply other course readings such as McGregor (1960) on Theory X and Theory Y; it also allows students to read the work by Putnam (1991) on Model 1 and Model 2 theories of human behavior, and reference Michael Maccoby's (1988) work on adult motivation and learning by going to online sources. Students also complete a motivation survey online, which allows them to see their own strengths and preconceptions concerning motivation and work. In a class environment, this might take hours with only a few students responding out loud. In a web based environment, all students' craft responses which are then read by everyone. So, there is a multiplier effect as well.

### **Concerns and Adaptations in the Delivery of the Web-based Courses**

Web-based instruction is being utilized in greater numbers in the present university climate. Web-based instruction is gaining acceptance in both public and private sectors as a cost-effective way to serve more students. For instance, the University of Phoenix has become the largest private university in the U.S., serving more than fifty thousand students, offering a combination of online, evening, and weekend classes. However, with the proliferation of web-based instruction, there are also concerns. There is greater potential for unregulated practice through web-based instruction; even with regulation, instruction might be monitored and managed by administrators rather than educators concerned with deeper moral purposes of their work. Further, web-based instruction might engender distractions and laziness, resulting in larger numbers of students who never complete a course than in comparison to traditional delivery modes (Trend, 2001).

There are some differences between web classes and face-to-face courses that go beyond the scope of this presentation (i.e., issues related to prior experience with computers, access to electronic media, synchronous and asynchronous participation, time, distance, etc.). This paper is more concerned with how curricular materials specific to educational leadership interact with web-based course instruction.

One concern in teaching classes on leadership is a possible gap between the written form of the web class and the mostly face-to-face settings in which leaders practice. To address this concern, reading assignments include case studies of leadership with longer and more complex stories of leadership. Mastery exercises ask learners to account for how leaders act by explaining the formal knowledge base that leaders draw from and connecting it to the "how-to" or craft knowledge that is required to do one's job inside and outside the school or organization (e.g., manage conflict, lead reform efforts, work with personnel, or respond to unanticipated crises,

etc.). Additionally, in discussion board postings, students comment on the more tacit or personal understanding of when and why leaders took action, and how their actions might be similar and different to the leadership actions described. Learners also respond to the actions and considerations of their classmates. Students can respond to the discussion board items at the same time or separately. Students meet, chat, discuss, and develop a sense of togetherness through this combination of online and face-to-face meetings.

Another practical concern has to do with the availability of information and materials related to leadership. Besides the instructor-developed materials, there are many commercial sites related to educational leadership and learning, which provide articles, biographies, books, and assessments. These online resources are available at the click of a mouse and mostly free of charge. The added benefit is that a web class student develops a personal library of information that serves as a continuing resource for study and reference. And, unlike traditional texts, many of these web resources and materials are continually updated. Additionally, some resources are made available to students. In one class, students get to watch the video *Balance* (Lauenstein & Lauenstein, 1989), an award winning animated short that was made available free of charge by the producers, ACME Films.

A third issue concerns feedback to and from the instructor. There are some traditional assignments in the course: Book review, Movie critique, Instructor based questions, Self-assessment, and Master exercise. In this web-based course, learners complete required reading assignments, web activities and searches, individual and group exercises in the discussion board, comments, web postings, and more. Learners have an opportunity to play a leadership role in the instruction by providing feedback to classmates on the discussion board; they also provide feedback to the instructor in mastery exercises and module evaluations. This allows for immediate feedback to the instructor. Another positive is that students in other leadership classes can make up missed class assignments by accessing the web-based materials that are open to everyone.

On the down side, there is a volume of email related to assignments that is significant. In one of the courses, there are approximately twenty separate written assignments, each of which requires an acknowledgement, written evaluation, grade, etc. With approximately twenty-five students in a class, this represents about five hundred emails, which are not evenly distributed over a semester. As long as the instructor is the hub for most of the assignments, the volume of email is a challenge to teaching on the web. As web courses become more commonplace in university programs, it is likely there will be adjustments to the number and types of assignments given in web classes to prevent lower motivation and burnout.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This approach to leadership development is designed to introduce the prin-

ciples, theories, and attributes related to learner centered educational leadership, using a web-based course. What knowledge is required of an education leader? How do you get this knowledge? What do leaders do to be seen as leaders? These are a few of the questions that are addressed in the learning experience designed for the course.

The basic view presented is that educational leaders must begin with an understanding of how people learn and how to be learners themselves. This view of a learner centered leader is in sharp contrast to the one-dimensional view of a leader, as one who must make decisions without pause or reflection (such as the U-boat captain in the film *U-571* [DeLaurentis, & DeLaurentis, 2000]).

When compared with traditional courses in educational leadership, web-based instruction in general and the specific web course discussed in this paper, provide opportunities for students to read, to participate in class discussions and exercises, and to reflect on the meaning of experience. Students are able to access research and readings online, in easily accessible formats. The course discussion boards provide opportunities for students to craft their own responses to questions and scenarios, as well as read and respond to their peers. The mastery exercises provide opportunities for students to reflect on how their experience connects with their more theoretical readings and research findings. This hopefully motivates learners to not only create a bridge between the more theoretical worlds of the university and the practical world of the school, but also the desire to cross over the bridge.

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